

Latest World Food Prize Laureate on Leadership

Sanjaya Rajaram believes that leadership can come with time.

Rajaram, who was just named the 2014 World Food Prize Laureate, led for decades the wheat-breeding program at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in Mexico.

As a young scientist at CIMMYT, “it took me some time before I could develop some of the skills in leadership,” said the successful Indian-born researcher. “I was able to recognize very early that there has to be a good balance in productivity and in people’s aspirations.”

“For me, the central core of leadership is team building, getting the best people to work together and recognizing each individual for their contribution to a common goal,” Rajaram said.

Rajaram claims the noted plant pathologist, World Food Prize founder and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Norman Borlaug as his main inspiration as a scientist and as a leader. He was highly influenced by fellow India native M.S. Swaminathan, who taught him about genetics, and by other agricultural researchers. “I basically heard these people talk about their philosophies, and that was enough for me,” he said.

After his time at CIMMYT, Rajaram became director of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), part of the same international research consortium that includes CIMMYT. He then moved to a private plant-breeding program in Mexico working on wheat and barley.

“Dr. Rajaram has helped to feed millions of people across the world through his lifetime of research and innovation,” U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said.

Rajaram noted that scientists of all ages who work to improve the quality and quantity of food accept that their work will have both successes and failures. “There are failures in most innovations. Indeed, in agricultural innovations, and especially in plant breeding, there are more failures than success,” he said.

Speaking of young people considering taking up agriculture as a career, Rajaram said: “I believe today’s youth would be very much interested in agriculture as a career if they understood the importance of food, nutrition, health, the environment and related issues.”

“We need leaders to talk to youth in language they can understand,” Rajaram said.

Photo credit: World Food Prize
